

Review of the book: The unlikely celebrity: Bill Sackter's triumph over disability.

By: J. David Smith

[Smith, J. D.](#) (1999). Review of the book The unlikely celebrity: Bill Sackter's triumph over disability. Mental Retardation. 37(5), 425-426.

Made available courtesy of American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1352/0047-6765\(1999\)037<0425:BR>2.0.CO;2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1352/0047-6765(1999)037<0425:BR>2.0.CO;2)

*****Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document. *****

Abstract:

Bill Sackter's Triumph Over Disability. T. Walz. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998.

In 1981, I saw Mickey Rooney in a made-for-television movie entitled Bill. In the movie Rooney portrayed a man who had lived for more than 40 years in a mental retardation institution and then, with the help of good friends, made a new life for himself in a university community. I remember the movie well. When I picked up the book *The Unlikely Celebrity: Bill Sackter's Triumph Over Disability*, the image of Mickey Rooney and his brilliant acting in the role of Bill dominated my thoughts about the man.

Keywords: book reviews | developmental disabilities | Bill Sackter

Article:

Bill Sackter's Triumph Over Disability. T. Walz. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998.

In 1981, I saw Mickey Rooney in a made-for-television movie entitled Bill. In the movie Rooney portrayed a man who had lived for more than 40 years in a mental retardation institution and then, with the help of good friends, made a new life for himself in a university community. I remember the movie well. When I picked up the book *The Unlikely Celebrity: Bill Sackter's Triumph Over Disability*, the image of Mickey Rooney and his brilliant acting in the role of Bill dominated my thoughts about the man.

By the time I read the last page of this remarkable book, a new and richer image of Sackter had been created in my mind. This book tells the story of a man who was far more complex and inspiring than could have been conveyed through even Rooney's brilliant acting.

Bill Sackter was born in Minnesota in 1913 to Russian Jewish immigrants. By the time he was

7, his father had died, and he was taken from his mother on the claim that she could not manage a feeble-minded child. For the next 45 years, Bill lived at Faribault State School.

With the coming of the deinstitutionalization movement in the mid-1960s, Bill found himself in the streets of Minneapolis. For 10 years he drifted through a series of board-and-room homes. He also struggled to become "a regular, good man" through finding and keeping a full-time job. His quest was largely unsuccessful, however, until he met Barry Marrow. Through this friendship Bill became the sole proprietor of Wild Bill's Coffee Shop in the University of Iowa's School of Social Work. Bill's relationships with the students, faculty, and staff there became the source for hundreds of stories that would later be told about him. Bill enriched the lives of seemingly all of the people who came to know him. It was Barry Morrow's telling of some of these stories that became the basis for the movie Bill.

The *Unlikely Celebrity* was written by Thomas Walz, a professor of social work at the University of Iowa. His book tells Bill's story in two voices. Many of the events of Bill's life are described in Bill's own voice. Walz also recounts the events, settings, and people encountered during Bill's journey from his perspective as Bill's friend. This provides readers with a life odyssey that is told from sometimes contrasting and other times complementary perspectives. The life saga of a person with mental retardation is, therefore, told in an unusually revealing and insightful manner. Walz explains in his acknowledgements that he wrote the book with two audiences in mind. He composed it as a tribute to Bill and to others who have "struggled to normalize life for their mentally challenged loved ones" (p. xvi). Walz also wrote Bill's story with mindfulness of those people who would read it with less awareness of mental retardation and with misconceptions about this developmental disability. The result of Walz's efforts to reach multiple audiences is a clear and engaging biography. The book is good reading for adults and adolescents in general. It is also appropriate for supplementary reading for undergraduate and introductory graduate courses that address mental retardation.

Readers will come away from the story with a new understanding of the negative encounters people with mental retardation often have with social institutions and other people. More important, the book is a testament to a person whose character and spirit eclipsed the impact of disabilities on his life.

There is perhaps no better explanation of Bill Sackter's personality and his influence on the people in his life than a proclamation presented to him by the Arizona State Legislature. It reads, in part,

What we see in the distance as problems looking like despair, you see a rainbow of hope. to us, a returned smile is not enough, to you, it is all that really matters. Those things that nature took away, God has made up for in the myriad of magic in your perception of life. We know your spontaneous affection for each of us has no ulterior motivation. That fact, in itself, endears you to our hearts more than you could ever know. For allowing us insight and helping us to appreciate the feelings of those with mental retardation and for allowing us and bearing with us while we mature to meet your clarity of emotion, we stand to salute you, Bill Sackter.

It is important to understand, however, that this is not a story that casts a person with mental

retardation in a heroic stereotype. We see Bill's human frailties as well as his strengths. Most important, we are allowed to see a human being striving for dignity in his life and achieving it through his friendships.

When Bill Sackter died in 1983, flags were flown at half-mast by the University of Iowa. Thomas Walz has written a book that is an even more fitting tribute to the life of his friend.